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## THE BIBLE OF JOHN CALVIN

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No literary work of the sixteenth century better measures the vast significance of the Renaissance than the exegetical writings of Calvin. To pass from the study of Athanasius or Augustine to that of Calvin is almost like a change of worlds. In the exegetical writings of those great men of the early church one flounders in a boundless morass, whose occasional bright and fragrant flowers are a poor substitute for solid and safe ground. Their Bible was a magical book, stranger than any fairy-tale, unreal, impossible. Quite different was the Bible of Calvin. Walking with him through the paths of Scripture, one feels that there is something firm under the feet, that one is dealing with real human history and life. The voice of the guide may be less winning and attractive than the voice of Augustine, but it is immeasurably more competent in explaining the significance of what is seen as we pass along. The fanciful allegorizations of Augustine give place to the sane comments of a balanced judgment fortified by much exact knowledge.

The exegesis of Calvin was as remarkable in its way as were the deeds of Luther, and when compared with the work of the third and fourth centuries is at once seen to belong to a vastly higher order. But while all this may truthfully be said to the praise of the French reformer, nevertheless his Bible was not the Bible of Jesus. He did not handle sacred books as Jesus did or as we do today. In some points his method was fundamentally wrong. It was neither that of supreme religious genius, like the method of Jesus, nor that of science, like the method of modern scholars. Of these points in Calvin's treatment of the Bible, hitherto unnoticed or ignored, it is our purpose now to speak; and this we do in the interest of a juster estimate of the foremost theologian of the reformation, and also to illustrate the great advance made in biblical interpretation since his day.

Calvin's conception of the Bible, though purified from many

ancient errors, was leavened throughout with a mechanical view of inspiration; but as this view has now been abandoned by the progressive churches, and is withal well known, it is not necessary to dwell upon it. We no longer think of the Bible as having been supernaturally "dictated," a book with whose content "nothing belonging to man" is mixed. For us the four evangelists do not speak "as with one mouth," nor do we think of explaining the first verse of the Bible by the last verse on the ground that both have the same author. When the diction of the prophets is "neat and elegant and even splendid," we do not regard it as a proof that the "Holy Spirit hath been pleased to show that he is not deficient in eloquence." According to the modern view of inspiration, the Bible has become an altogether different book; and could we assume that Calvin, if he were to return to the earth, would still have the same views of Scripture which he once taught in Geneva, our Bible would probably seem to him a very poor affair. And yet the change which has passed upon it is to us as a change from death to life.

Again, Calvin subordinated the Bible to the doctrine of the church. In theory, indeed, he rejected with much feeling "the pernicious error that the Scriptures have only so much weight as the suffrages of the church concede to them, as though the eternal and invisible truth of God depended on the arbitrary will of man;" and yet in fact he himself measured the Bible with the measuring-rod of church doctrine, and searched it by the light of the Nicene Creed. In other words, he came to the Bible with a well-settled and firmly held system of theology, and, like every one who does that, he found no difficulty in discovering the requisite Scripture proof. As this feature of Calvin's interpretation is obviously of great importance, we must ask the reader to consider two or three illustrations of it. And when we do this, it will be well to remember that this particular error of Calvin still flourishes like the palm tree. What denominational "ism" is there among us which would not shrivel up if it had no other nourishment than that which it gets from the Bible?

But to our illustrations. In explaining the narrative of the visit of three men to Abraham at Mamre, Calvin lays down this general law, that "whenever God manifested himself to the Fathers, Christ was the mediator between him and them." But whence did

Calvin derive this general principle, which he introduces in his commentary on Genesis as though it were a self-evident truth? He did not claim to get it from Genesis, nor did he mention any chapter of the Bible in which he found it. No, and he could not have done so if he had tried. He unconsciously read into Genesis what he had received from the early theologians.

Take another typical case. In his commentary on Romans, speaking of 1:3, Calvin says: "Two things must be found in Christ in order that we may obtain salvation in him, even divinity and humanity. His divinity possesses power, righteousness, life, which by his humanity are conveyed to us." But what "*must*" be found in Scripture *can* be found. If we *must*, we can prove from Scripture the divine right of kings, we can find ample justification of slavery, and even of polygamy. If we *must*, we can readily deduce from the Bible the doctrine that the end justifies the means, or the doctrine that the earth is the center of the universe. If we *must*, we can show from Scripture that it was right for Calvin to have Servetus burned at the stake, and we can show with equal or greater cogency that it would have been right to burn Calvin where he burned Servetus.

When an interpreter says, as he confronts a passage of Scripture, "Now this doctrine must be found here," he plainly subordinates the Bible to the church, and makes it quite impossible to understand what the Bible teaches. In declaring what *must* be found in Christ, Calvin joined himself with the Jews of Christ's own day, who, because they were sure that they knew what the Messiah must be in order to help them, passed perverse judgment on Jesus.

A third feature of Calvin's interpretation which must be regarded as fundamentally wrong is its failure to give any pre-eminence to the revelation of God in Jesus. Revelation, as apprehended by Calvin, is essentially a dead level from Genesis to the Apocalypse. He says that "whatever is presented to us in the present day in our sacraments was anciently received by the Jews in theirs, *even Christ and his spiritual riches*." The difference between the Old Testament and the New is merely "formal and administrative."

Calvin's failure to give any pre-eminence to the revelation of Jesus might be copiously illustrated either from his commentaries or the *Institutes*, and with reference to any line of Christian teaching. Thus,

out of some fifteen passages of Scripture cited in the *Institutes* in regard to the kingdom of Christ, only three are from Jesus himself, and they stand on the same level with the utterances of the Psalms and Daniel. One may read Calvin's entire treatment of the subject of God, and there will not be found a single reference to anything that Jesus said in regard to God's *character*. The words of the Master which are cited are made to refer to the doctrine of the Trinity, almost without exception. Jesus said that no one but the Son knew the Father, but one would not infer from Calvin's presentation of the doctrine of God that Jesus knew him any more fully than did the Psalmist or the prophets. His words are not even discriminated from those of any of the writers who are quoted; they are simply the words of one more witness.

The same method is pursued in reference to Jesus himself. He is not considered as supreme authority even in regard to his own person. Isaiah and the Psalms are equally good authority, and are more frequently quoted. More attention is given to the Christ who is supposed to be found in the forty-fifth psalm than to the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, this is a travesty on interpretation, than which none can be imagined more disastrous to the truth. If the claims of Jesus are admitted; if he fulfilled the law and the prophets; if he alone knew the Father and could make him known; if he first made known the principles of the kingdom of God; if he made the acceptance of his teaching and the following of his example fundamental principles of discipleship, then obviously the revelation of God in him is not to be dragged down to the level of his revelation in Genesis or the Psalms. An exegesis which does this is neither loyal to the founder of Christianity nor scientific.

To recapitulate: Calvin's interpretation of the Bible was burdened with three grave errors—a mechanical view of inspiration, a subordination of Scripture to the doctrines of the church, and a failure to give pre-eminence to the revelation of God in Jesus. It marked an advance on the interpretation of Augustine and the other early Fathers, but has been left far behind in the march of biblical science.